

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO THE CLIMATE DEBATE

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THE CASE FOR A CLIMATE DEBATE

Climate change is the defining challenge of our time. The United States must take the lead, acting decisively and quickly to avert catastrophic warming of more than 1.5 degrees Celsius, according to scientists.¹

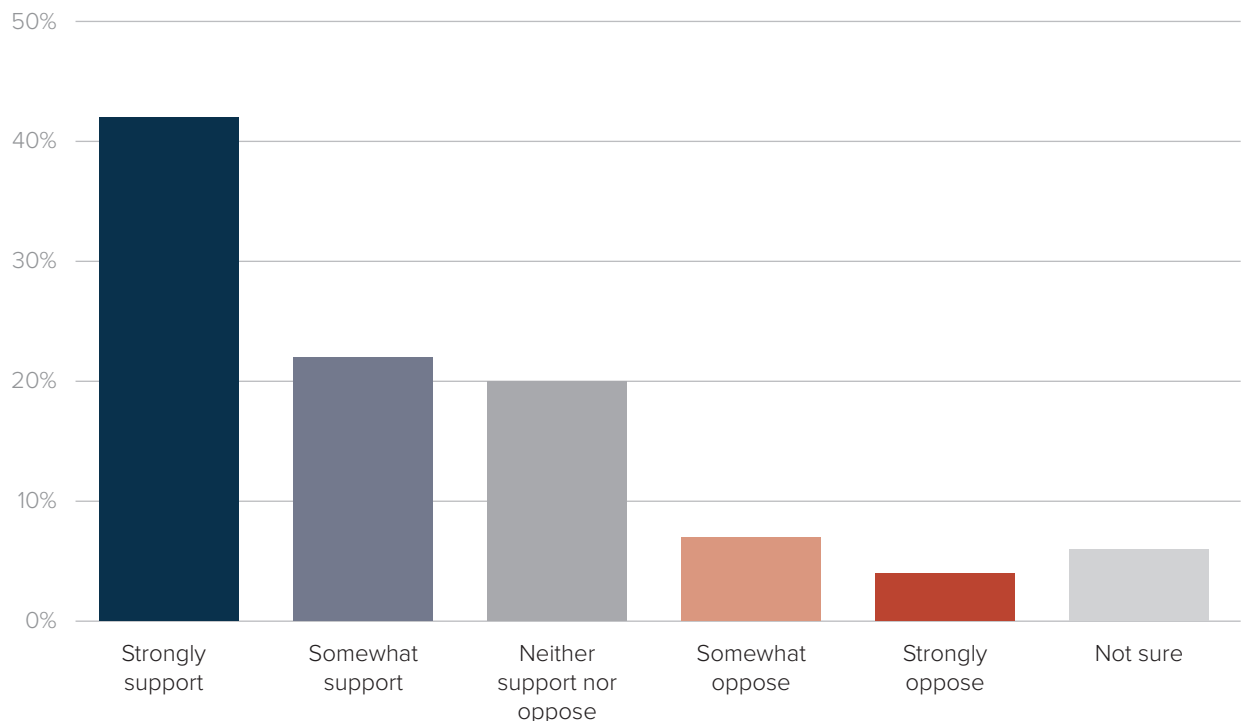
Despite the existential nature of this crisis, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) has defied the voices of hundreds of thousands of its rank-and-file members, prominent leaders inside the party, as well as 15 of its highest profile presidential candidates and decided that it will not hold a climate-debate. What's more, the party has stated that it will blacklist any candidates who decide to participate in unsanctioned debates about global warming.²

In recent months, climate change has emerged as a leading issue in the 2020 elections.³ In most surveys, the climate crisis is ranked as the most or second most important issue for Democratic primary voters. An unprecedented swell of grassroots organizing led by youth movements like Sunrise and the US Climate Strikes has rapidly elevated climate to the top of the national agenda. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Senator Ed Markey of Massachusetts introduced a resolution for a Green New Deal, outlining goals and projects for a ten-year mobilization to tackle the climate crisis.⁴ Most candidates have endorsed this vision. Think tanks like Data for Progress have begun crafting policies around this mission.⁵ Other campaigns, politicians, academics and think tanks have responded by developing their own platforms, plans and legislation. A new era of national climate debate has begun.⁶

It is hard to overstate this remarkable transformation. In the 2016 elections, presidential candidates spent a total of five minutes and twenty-seven seconds addressing climate change and other environmental issues across three debates—just two percent of total stage time.⁷ It's safe to say that we have already heard more about candidates' climate plans this cycle—and the debates haven't yet begun.

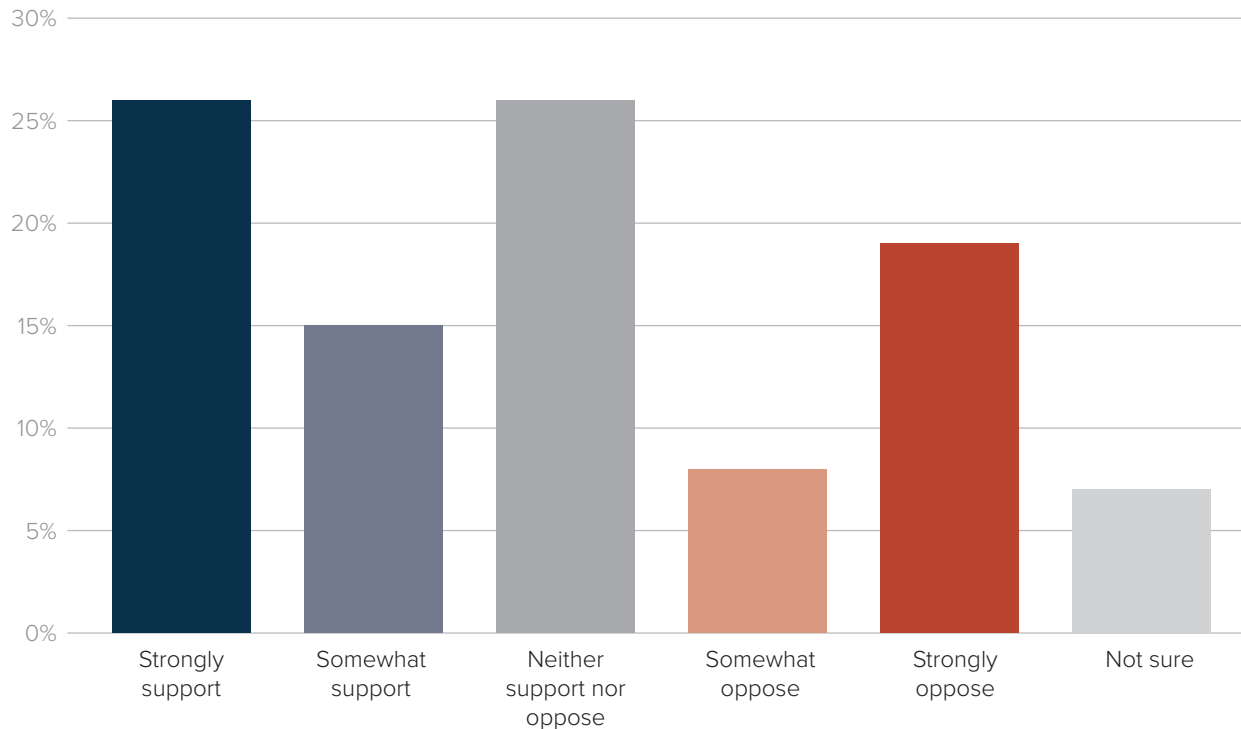
To ensure that climate change gets the platform it deserves, grassroots activists are calling for a climate-focused Democratic primary debate. Organizations have collected over 200,000 signatures calling for the DNC to host such a discussion.⁸ Washington state Democratic Party Chair Tina Podlodowski has also drafted a resolution, signed by at least nine state party chairs and over 50 party members, joining the campaign for a debate.⁹ At present, 15 Democratic Presidential candidates, eager to show leadership on the issue, have joined their call.¹⁰ New polling from Data for Progress shows that 41% of voters, including 64% of Democrats and left-leaning independents, support the idea compared to just 27% of voters opposed, for +14 net support.¹¹

SUPPORT FOR A CLIMATE-SPECIFIC DEBATE DEMOCRATS & INDEPENDENTS WHO LEAN DEMOCRATIC WHO REPORT THEY WILL VOTE IN THE PRIMARY



DATA FOR PROGRESS

SUPPORT FOR A CLIMATE-SPECIFIC DEBATE US VOTERS



DATA FOR **PROGRESS**

While the DNC defies some of its most prominent candidates, its most engaged activists, its best leaders and many voters, climate change proceeds unabated. How does the party expect voters to differentiate the candidates and their platforms without putting them side-by-side? Why not hold a debate to signal to voters and the country that this issue is the defining challenge of our time?

Comprehensive climate policy like a Green New Deal, which 14 candidates have endorsed, is a remarkably promising framework for Democrats.¹² First, it expresses the urgency of action on climate change; second, it allows for a policy approach that addresses racial justice and economic inequality alongside emissions; third, it is broad enough to address many pollutants; and, finally, it moves beyond insufficient, market-based approaches to global warming.

A strong right-wing attack led by *Fox News* has portrayed climate action and the Green New Deal negatively. Encouragingly, however, surveys from Data for Progress and other groups show that voters strongly support the individual policies that could comprise a Green New Deal.¹³ Currently, Democrats hold a monopoly on the issue as most Republicans continue to deny science, even though they draw their strongest base of support from the most climate-impacted region of the country: The South.¹⁴ This is a prime moment for Democrats to show leadership, win voters, expand their electorate and reinvigorate the national discourse. We cannot afford to miss this opportunity for climate leadership.

With that in mind, Data for Progress has outlined 15 key issues that could provide great material for a lively conversation among candidates, pundits and activists that would inform voters and strengthen the overall climate literacy of the electorate. Here, we provide a brief outline of these central issues and the different positions candidates and climate advocates hold.

SUBJECTS FOR A CLIMATE DEBATE

CARBON PRICING

Should climate policy focus on market-based mechanisms like a carbon tax, carbon price or cap-and-trade?

ARGUMENT 1: Market-based mechanisms are insufficient, unpopular and can potentially create a moral hazard wherein fossil fuel production extends rather than sunsets. Moreover, markets benefit those most equipped to capitalize on them: corporations and the wealthy while leaving behind low-income families and communities of color.

ARGUMENT 2: Market-based mechanisms like a carbon tax should not be the topline tools for decarbonizing the economy in a policy package like a Green New Deal. But, if designed properly, they can be effective instruments to achieve climate targets and hasten the transition away from fossil fuels. They should not be taken off the table.

ARGUMENT 3: A progressive carbon tax is an essential tool to help decarbonize the economy while raising revenues for the energy transition and to offset the cost burdens placed on communities of color and middle class and low-income households.

ARGUMENT 4: To pass comprehensive climate policy like a Green New Deal, Democrats would have to achieve a 50 vote majority, repeal the filibuster and perhaps pack the Supreme Court and maybe even grant statehood to Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. That seems like a longshot, although some elements of the progressive movement are seriously considering this strategy. Meanwhile, a price on carbon that is revenue neutral in ten years could *maybe* be passed through budget reconciliation and is, according to some calculations, potential grounds for bipartisan compromise. For example, in the past two years several Republicans have proposed carbon taxes that also reduce regulation and limit liability for fossil fuel industries. Further, according to economists, a carbon pricing is the most efficient climate policy.

KEEP IT IN THE GROUND

Should climate policy like a Green New Deal explicitly call for restrictive supply-side interventions into the energy economy to bring about a managed decline and phaseout of fossil fuels, for example by banning new fossil fuel developments offshore and on public lands?

ARGUMENT 1: Climate policy like a Green New Deal must be framed, first and foremost, around phasing out fossil fuels. This is what science and justice demand. Indigenous nations, environmental justice communities and activists are on the frontlines of a campaign to stop the corporations that are the greatest contributors to climate change. In some states, like South Dakota, Texas and Louisiana, their constitutional right to

free speech and protest is being undermined and attacked. We must stand with these communities against Big Oil and for democratic rights and a livable climate.

ARGUMENT 2: Climate policy like a Green New Deal must include provisions to transition our economy off of fossil fuels, but there are diverse approaches to achieve this end and unresolved issues, particularly around air travel and shipping. This argument extends to other sources of emissions like cattle, steel and concrete production. To build a big tent with labor, we need to be flexible and craft a timeline and approach that allows us to transition off fossil fuels as fast as possible.

ARGUMENT 3: The climate policy drafting process must prioritize the voices of working families, in particular labor unions, including those that represent workers in the fossil fuel industry that will need to transition to new sectors. Keep it in the ground fails to acknowledge the role these communities and workers played in powering the American economy. Many rank-and-file union members are now part of the Trump base. Clean-tech corporations like Tesla are vigorously anti-union because they need to keep down costs to remain competitive. Meanwhile, other renewable sector jobs, like solar installation, are decentralized and therefore structurally challenging for unions, which, as a rule tend to organize most effectively in large centralized workplaces, like utilities, mines and pipelines. Clean energy jobs also tend to pay less well than jobs in extractive industries.¹⁵ These factors have set the labor movement in general and the building trades in particular at odds with the keep it in the ground movement.

ARGUMENT 4: Tens of millions of homes and businesses rely on fossil fuels. The energy transition will put an immense burden on these households and businesses—including working families and mom and pop shops. The energy transition will be costly in terms of labor, time and dollars spent and could create a backlash from a general public anxious about the uncertainty associated with new forms of energy and technology disrupting daily life. This is even more likely given growing income inequality. We must therefore find ways to keep down the costs of the transition and address income inequality. The keep it in the ground approach may exacerbate these challenges.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR FOSSIL FUEL CORPORATIONS

How should fossil fuel companies and electric utilities be held accountable, both for past pollution and for knowing misrepresentation of climate science to the public and shareholders?

ARGUMENT 1: About two dozen fossil fuel companies are responsible for over half the global greenhouse gas emissions over the last three decades.¹⁶ Many of these companies—most notably, Exxon Mobil—lied and misled politicians, the press and the public about climate science and their own scientific research, beginning as early as the 1950s.¹⁷ Just as Big Tobacco was held liable for its decades-long misinformation campaign, fossil fuel corporations should be investigated and made to pay damages to frontline communities and pay their fair share for federal, state and local efforts to reduce emissions.¹⁸

ARGUMENT 2: Climate change is a dire crisis. A settlement agreement should be reached with fossil fuel companies that would commit them to cease all future exploration of fossil fuel reserves and swiftly transition their business models towards investment in clean energy resources. Already, two electric utilities in the U.S. have voluntarily committed themselves to go 100% carbon-free, citing business considerations.¹⁹

ARGUMENT 3: Fossil fuels are essential to industrialized economies. Oil, coal and gas corporations cannot possibly be held responsible for the energy demands of diverse actors, big and small, throughout society. Moreover, as major employers, drivers of innovation and key global geopolitical allies, fossil fuel corporations can be major players in pragmatic approaches to the energy transition, which should combine a moderate price on carbon with deregulation.²⁰

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND INEQUALITY

Should climate policy like the Green New Deal prioritize environmental justice and target investments towards low-income communities of color to alleviate gaps in income and wealth across racial lines, promote access to social rights like housing, transportation and healthcare and address longstanding pollution burdens on communities of color?

ARGUMENT 1: Climate policy can be a driver of racial justice and equality. If policies like universal health-care, housing, a federal jobs guarantee and clean air and water protections are part of legislative packages, those provisions should be targeted to combat institutional racism and close the racial wealth gap.²¹ This could include reparations for African Americans for centuries of slavery, Jim Crow, redlining and other racist laws and policies.²²

ARGUMENT 2: Climate policy should emphasize universal programs and should not target programs towards specific groups, for example based on race or protected class status.²³ Evidence suggests universal programs do more to alleviate inequality and have greater public support and political durability.²⁴

ARGUMENT 3: The Green New Deal went wrong when it tethered climate policy to social and racial justice. Transforming the energy system is a monumental task and we should not let other worthy social goals make it even more challenging to make progress on climate policy.²⁵

JUST TRANSITION FOR WHOM?

Should climate policy like a Green New Deal prioritize a just transition for frontline communities or workers in fossil fuel and adjacent industries?

The debate about who the “just transition” should prioritize has, thus far, accommodated both environmental justice and labor constituencies. It could, however, be expanded and brought into broader conversation with structural shifts in the labor market towards a low-carbon caring economy. Ongoing debates about definitions and priorities could become a live question in future legislation, to get buy-in from oil, coal and gas producing states like West Virginia and Alaska and where coalitions are able to legislate state-level versions of a Green New Deal. Key questions here include: What benefits are included? Which industries and communities are eligible? And how could it be administered?

ELECTRICITY MIX

Should the Green New Deal aim for 100% renewable energy--wind, solar, geothermal--in the electricity sector, or remain open to a more diverse power mix that includes other clean energy sources like hydropower and nuclear energy?

ARGUMENT 1: Nuclear power comes with major environmental justice concerns, particularly for frontline

Indigenous communities like the Diné and Havasupai who continue to live with the enduring impacts of uranium mining and nuclear testing. We also lack adequate plans to decommission nuclear plants or deal with waste storage. Similarly, hydroelectric dams disrupt rivers and marine ecosystems and, in some areas of the country, the treaty rights of Indigenous peoples. New hydropower developments also create methane emissions and there are very few sites left to develop in the United States. These energy sources and others like biomass come with significant environmental and justice tradeoffs and should be taken off the table.

ARGUMENT 2: Existing zero-emissions energy sources like hydropower and nuclear should not be taken off the table preemptively because it is very likely that they would be replaced with fossil fuels, through fracked gas, rather than renewable sources, which would lock-in emissions for decades. Currently, nuclear energy is the largest source of zero emissions power in the United States, and many plants are slated for retirement in the coming years and decades. Moreover, there are significant technological challenges with deeper penetration of renewables in the energy mix. Important issues include large land use for renewables, electricity storage and the construction of transmission lines across state borders. These significant challenges mean that we should not take nuclear energy, particularly existing plants, off the table.

TIMELINES FOR ZERO EMISSIONS

What timelines should be set for emissions targets in the electricity sector and other more challenging areas of the economy to decarbonize?

Timelines have proven to be one of the most divisive issues among climate and Green New Deal advocates.²⁶ Greenhouse gas emissions come from many parts of the economy: electric power plants, buildings, transportation, waste, agriculture and industry. Each sector is a different size and requires different solutions to zero out emissions. How we prioritize and schedule decarbonization has major economic implications. Many candidates—most notably Jay Inslee—have laid out different targets for each sector. Most plans, however, emphasize the power sector.

In April, the Sunrise Movement criticized Beto O'Rourke for setting what were, in their view, insufficiently ambitious targets in his climate platform. Experts and journalists, most notably David Roberts of *Vox*, pointed out that Sunrise was asking candidates to do the impossible.²⁷ The youth climate organization soon retracted their attack, but continues to emphasize in its messaging that the United States had a responsibility to decarbonize more rapidly due to its greater technological capacity and responsibility. Their perspective, according to some experts, fails to account for the spillover impacts of American innovation and decarbonization, which will have international, not just domestic, impacts. This debate has featured prominently in the past and will likely emerge again.

ARGUMENT 1: The United States should aim to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. Emissions reductions and technological innovation to this end will help developing nations decarbonize along a similar timeline.

ARGUMENT 2: The United States has greater technological capacity and global responsibility and should aim for net-zero emissions by 2030.

ARGUMENT 3: The United States should aim for net zero emissions by mid-century and no later than 2045, but different sectors require different emissions targets. The electricity, transportation and building sectors can all fully decarbonize by 2030, while other sectors will require more time. Technological innovation and emissions reductions here will have benefits globally.

CARBON CAPTURE AND STORAGE

Should climate policy include carbon capture and sequestration (CCS)?

ARGUMENT 1: CCS is an unproven and expensive technology. It also creates a moral hazard that could prolong fossil fuel production and endanger frontline and fenceline communities located next to industrial facilities which would remain hotspots of pollution.

ARGUMENT 2: CCS is an important solution, particularly given the storage challenges associated with intermittent renewable energy sources. We should build upon policies like 45Q, which provides funding for carbon capture, utilization and storage, to drive innovation.

NEGATIVE EMISSIONS TECHNOLOGIES

Scientific reports are largely unanimous in the need for negative emissions technologies, wherein carbon is removed from the atmosphere and stored. Given significant delay on climate policy, there is no path currently outlined that would keep the planet below 1.5 or even 2 degrees of warming without some of these technologies.²⁸ Further, some sectors such as aviation and heavy industry will be very challenging to decarbonize. How will we promote negative emissions?

ARGUMENT 1: We must focus on proven natural climate solutions, such as afforestation. This approach could meet the Paris Agreement targets, according to new research from the University of Technology Sydney.²⁹ It is also preferred by some advocates and experts, who are skeptical of unproven negative emissions technologies and their impacts on frontline and fence line communities.

ARGUMENT 2: We must invest in both natural climate solutions as well as technological innovation for Direct Air Capture (DAC). Technological solutions are likely to prove particularly important given that many ecosystems are already stressed and emitting carbon, such as the boreal forest. Given that climate change is already accelerating forest fires, natural solutions alone are unlikely to prove sufficient in the timescale required.

CARBON OFFSETS

How should carbon offsets factor into climate policy?

ARGUMENT 1: Some sectors, like agriculture, air travel, power plants and particular industrial processes like steel and concrete production will require carbon offsets so the United States can meet economy-wide reductions targets. Moreover, regulation, research and investment to promote carbon offsets can drive innovation in necessary negative emissions technologies.

ARGUMENT 2: Carbon offsets are a moral hazard and, particularly if they are designed in favor of polluting industries and poorly monitored, can function as a license to continue pollution, particularly in frontline and fenceline communities. Moreover carbon offset programs are difficult to verify and are prone to leakage and poor accounting and double counting.

LINKING CLIMATE POLICY AND SOCIAL POLICY

Should climate policy be linked to social policy, with legislative packages that include social programs like Medicare for All?

While it seems likely that Medicare for All will be legislated outside of climate law like a Green New Deal, current platforms and legislation frame climate change as an economic, racial, environmental and social justice issues. This has also proved popular and effective messaging.

ARGUMENT 1: The climate crisis is too dire to divert scarce resources or time to other political and partisan causes unrelated to climate and energy policy. Every public dollar spent on social policy diverts from emissions reductions. Decarbonization goals are already difficult to achieve. Inefficient use of public funding on social policies under the umbrella of climate policy are irresponsible. Policymakers should focus their efforts on reforming the energy system.

ARGUMENT 2: The economy that brought us climate change and environmental pollution is the same economy that created vast economic inequality and social injustice. Systemic problems require systemic solutions to build a society that works for all. Moreover, the threat posed by climate change requires us to fortify people, households and communities. Resilience is key. In a society and world transformed by warming, people need the security of work, wealth, health, and safety to bounce back. Particularly as we transition communities away from fossil fuels, we need to support workers by providing them with a strong social safety net. Further, linking climate policy and social policy is likely to bolster support.

DENSER AND MORE SUSTAINABLE CITIES

Should federal climate policy like a Green New Deal wade into state and local issues to promote things like denser cities?

Urbanizing and densifying sprawling suburbanized metropolitan areas would promote energy efficiency, environmental protection, affordability and public transportation. Multifamily buildings are more energy-efficient than detached homes. Clustered homes, businesses and services reduce travel distances and encourage walking, biking and public transit—all low or no-carbon mobility options. Transportation is one of the main drivers of carbon pollution and localized health harms.

Pro-density “smart growth” policies can, however, be difficult to steer federally without major investment. The Obama administration had some success with its “Partnership for Growth” strategy, which used competitions for federal dollars like TIGER funds to incentivize public transit like light rail and used the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to direct fiscal stimulus toward sustainable urbanism.³⁰ Many presidential candidates have proposed policies that would increase housing funding for jurisdictions that reform zoning codes to promote densification and integration through the enforcement of the Fair Housing Act. Because state and local control are entrenched in our federal system, the federal government’s greatest leverage comes through these indirect fiscal carrots and legal sticks.

Densification has come to be seen by many housing justice activists as a kinder word for gentrification. Density and transit-oriented urban investment and rezoning can raise land values, displace working class residents and communities of color and provoke resistance. As a result, efforts to increase density have faced opposition from community-based organizations and activists, who fear that new development will supplant

them. At the same time, affluent homeowners often fight new transit and housing that they fear would lower property values. In California, for example, SB 50, a proposal to promote dense and green affordability divided environmental activists and stoked NIMBYism.³¹ Process in policy drafting is key. In Minneapolis, Minnesota, an effective and democratic stakeholder process created community buy-in to end single-family zoning.

Research suggests decarbonization through densification is maximized when paired with metropolitan-scale affordable housing development.³² Federal funding for affordable housing near public transit would both help alleviate housing costs and mitigate climate change. California has pioneered this approach through its Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities program.³³

Federal policy can also sponsor energy upgrades, or “weatherization”, for buildings in neighborhoods with the greatest need. In the mid-Atlantic, for example, half of African American households cannot afford utility payments.³⁴ Increasing residential energy efficiency could cut carbon pollution more than any other single policy.³⁵ And in general, subsidized housing is the least energy efficient housing type. Changes to federal regulations could achieve major benefits.³⁶ And programs to adjust building codes and appliance efficiency requirements would have long-term benefits in energy efficiency and affordability, especially for low-income families.³⁷

Size matters. Modest federal actions are unlikely to impact urban land use policies and climate outcomes. Well-designed and funded programs that combine public transit and affordable densification would reduce emissions and ease the housing crisis. This approach is consistent with the Green New Deal ideal of tackling inequality and pollution together.

LOCAL CONTROL, INDIGENOUS RIGHTS AND LAND RIGHTS

How do we engage and empower local communities to actualize national climate policies?

A Green New Deal would require a massive infrastructure overhaul, including the development of vast new public transportation networks, renewable energy and a national green grid among many other projects. Development, particularly construction that benefits private or corporate interests against smaller property owners and public interests, can stoke NIMBYism. How do we ensure that constituencies like Indigenous nations, landowners and boomer generation environmentalists who fought with us against the fossil fuel industry do not fight a Green New Deal?³⁸ How do we engage and empower communities to actualize their visions for a Green New Deal? And what is the future of Indigenous rights and land rights in the context of climate change and the energy transition?

INTERNATIONAL EMISSIONS AND LEADERSHIP

What is the United States global role and responsibility?

The United States accounts for 15-20% of global emissions and emissions from China, India and the developing world are growing. As small countries in other regions develop, they are likely to rely on cheaper fossil fuels to grow their economies. What role should the U.S. take to advance a global Green New Deal to ensure other nations decarbonize along safer pathways? How should we leverage our influence in trade for these goals? What other tools do we deploy in terms of diplomacy, aid, technology transfer, and pacts? And what is our responsibility to low-lying island nations and people in the Global South, who contributed the least to this crisis but are bearing the most punishing costs?

PAYING FOR CLIMATE POLICY

Should climate policy like a Green New Deal draw from a clear and immediate revenue sources for expenditures?

Public and private investment will be key to decarbonizing the economy and building resilient communities. There are several competing theories about how to fund this transition. Options include repealing subsidies, creating new revenue streams, deficit spending and quantitative easing.

ARGUMENT 1: The private sector should lead the energy transition. Market forces are powerful, but direct and indirect subsidies currently guide investments towards industries that undermine climate and environmental aims. The public sector's primary role should be to facilitate private investments in clean energy and technology through market signals, like regulations, a carbon tax and incentives, like tax credits. Large-scale public spending would create deficits and undermine free market principles.

ARGUMENT 2: The public sector must be a primary driver of the energy transition, but government spending should be budget positive or neutral. To balance budgets, lawmakers could reduce spending in other areas of the economy, like the defense sector, and create new forms of revenue by putting a price on carbon pollution while reducing expenditures and subsidies for dirty energy. This would, in turn, create funding for government spending to advance climate, environmental and social goods.

ARGUMENT 3: Every public dollar does not need to be accounted for before it is spent. Republicans never have to jump through that hoop to fund the military or pass tax-cuts for billionaires and corporations. The federal government does not need to constrain spending because of fears about pay-fors and the deficit. Instead, Congress can authorize spending on big, necessary functions, like climate action, while managing for inflation and real resource constraints. This position is supported by, among others, proponents of Modern Monetary Theory.

CONCLUSION

The climate crisis is proceeding at a startling pace, but luckily climate activism, politics and debate are growing to meet the challenge. As a party and as a society, we have many deep and challenging issues to consider as we reshape our nation to mitigate and adapt to a changing climate.

This is a living document intended to inform and empower voters, organizers and leaders to wade into some of the most pressing challenges of our time. We certainly hope that it helps inform the climate debate, and that it makes clear to party leaders in the DNC that this is a complex issue, worthy of significant time including its own debate, that we cannot afford to ignore any longer. These issues deserve the stage. As an enlightened progressive party—the only major party that stands on the right side of this issue—the DNC should recognize that. We urge Tom Perez and party leaders to stand with grassroots activists, state party chairs and presidential candidates and center the climate crisis in the presidential debates.

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